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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [TD](#)
SUBJECT: UNC EXECUTIVE: PNM'S OUT TO GET US, BUT PANDAY'S
STILL FIGHTING

REF: A. A. PORT OF SPAIN 00488

[1](#)B. B. PORT OF SPAIN 00505
[1](#)C. C. PORT OF SPAIN 00253

Classified By: Classified by: DCM, Eugene P. Sweeney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In an April 25 meeting with Political Section officers, the United National Congress (UNC) executive indicated their belief that former Leader of the Opposition Panday's conviction and sentence is another sign of Government harassment and abuse of the Opposition. They detailed other alleged Government abuses of power and asked that the USG raise the issue with the Government to end their power madness. The UNC leaders also derided ostracized Political Leader Winston Dookeran, indicating that he is out of step with the party and on his way out. Further, they place their trust in Panday who continues to call the shots from jail. This attitude of victimization along with unwavering loyalty to Panday is unlikely to gain the UNC any new support among the populace and probably will not propel them into Government in the next general elections, despite the UNC's belief to the contrary. END SUMMARY.

UNC ALLEGES PNM IS POWER HUNGRY; MANIPULATING SYSTEM

[1](#)2. (C) Political Section officers met with available members of the UNC Executive Council on April 25 in the wake of Basdeo Panday's conviction and revocation of his position as Leader of the Opposition (reftels A and B). Three members of the UNC Executive Council, (CEO Dr. Tim Gopeesingh, Vice Chairman Vasant Bharath and Deputy Political Leader Wade Mark) and former UNC Attorney General Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj were present for the meeting. Overall, the UNC sees Panday's conviction and sentencing as just one more sign that the PNM has gone mad with power and is attempting to get rid of the UNC before the next elections.

[1](#)3. (C) Although not yet a party member, Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj did most of the talking, supposedly because of his extensive experience as a lawyer, his prior experience as an Attorney General and his open lines of communication with Panday. Maharaj stated, quoting from the written decision of Chief Magistrate McNicholls, "After its presentation, I determined that the prosecution had proven its case, and called on the defense to answer the charges." According to Maharaj, this indicates that McNicholls had reached his decision even before the defense made its case, which is a violation of appropriate practice and illustrates manipulation by the PNM. If nothing else, according to Maharaj, it is clear grounds for an appeal and likely to get the conviction thrown out. Maharaj further opined that not

granting bail as a matter of course in a summary judgment is unheard of in T&T, and indicates that the PNM simply wants to take Panday off the scene for a couple of weeks for some undisclosed reason. (NOTE: There are a couple of problems with these assertions. First, it is normal for the judge or magistrate to determine whether the prosecution's case is worthy of rebuttal before calling on the defense to proceed with its case. In this case, McNicholls may have been sloppy with his language. Second, the UNC is ignoring the distinction between the constitutional right to bail before conviction and the discretionary right of a judge to grant bail based on extraordinary or humanitarian grounds after a conviction and while appeal is pending. END NOTE.)

¶4. (C) Maharaj also raised his concern that the President acted astonishingly quickly in declaring the post of Leader of the Opposition vacant in less than 24 hours. Noting that Prime Minister Manning announced Monday evening that the Acting Attorney General was in consultation with the President on the next constitutional steps, Maharaj questioned the appropriateness of this close collaboration and identified it as further inappropriate influence. (NOTE: After receiving her nomination from eight of the 15 remaining opposition MPs, the President also acted quickly in confirming Kamla Persad-Bissessar as the new Leader of the Opposition, reaching a decision in much less than 24 hours (ref B). END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) In what is likely an effort to redirect attention away from Panday's predicament, UNC CEO Dr. Tim Gopeesingh cited government initiatives such as the proposed redevelopment of east Port of Spain and the proposed new aluminum smelters in the south as indicators of government disregard for the consultative process. He also alleges that the Director of Public Prosecutions is no longer independent of the Government, and pointed out that recommended DPP

investigations into the activities of PNM members in redevelopment of the Point Fortin area have never been acted upon. UNC Vice Chairman Vasant Bharath noted that Trinbagonians have gone numb and are oblivious to the gradual accretion of power to the PNM. Gopeesingh and Mark requested some sort of intervention by the USG as the GOTT is "abusing its power and leading T&T, and even all of CARICOM down the wrong track. Their actions should be disturbing to the USG because of the vast investment in T&T."

DOOKERAN: NOT A REAL LEADER AND OUT OF SYNCH

¶6. (C) The UNC executive clearly indicated their dislike for Dookeran. Gopeesingh nearly snarled when Dookeran's name came up. They allege that certain business interests who wish to maintain the status quo are financially backing Dookeran, as well as the PNM, so that the PNM will win the next general elections. The UNC representatives universally derided Dookeran's leadership ability and said that he was out of step with the party. Maharaj identified the February 19 UNC Unity Rally (ref C) as a turning point in Dookeran's career with the UNC. Dookeran came with a message dramatically different from that of the others on the stage, and has not been able to recover his standing with the rank-and-file, nor with the UNC leadership since. Additionally, Wade Mark noted that Dookeran was not working to rally the party behind Panday, which is what they would have expected a true party leader to do. At the press conference announcing Persad-Bissessar's Leader position, Gopeesingh publicly derided Dookeran for being out of step and not supporting the party.

NEVER FEAR, PAPA PANDAY'S GOT A PLAN...

¶7. (C) At the end of the meeting, Maharaj revealed that he had visited Panday in jail, and informed him that they were meeting with embassy representatives. Panday approved of the

meeting and encouraged Maharaj to provide whatever information he could. Panday also passed along that although he was in prison, he still had a plan, the results of which, Maharaj commented, we would see soon enough. Mark and Gopeesingh highlighted the fact that Panday is inextricably linked to the UNC, and indicated that he will continue to call the shots, even though he may be outside the Parliament. They pointed out that Dookeran came to power only because Panday gave it to him, and they hinted that Dookeran's power is soon to be taken away.

COMMENT: PANDAY FOCUS HOLDING THE UNC BACK

18. (C) The UNC seems to have settled on a message of PNM abuse of power and persecution of the opposition as their primary talking points. The UNC Executive is also maintaining a fierce, nearly dogmatic loyalty to the jailed Panday. In spite of their assertions that Panday's sentence will galvanize the UNC and lead them to an overwhelming victory in the next general elections, we doubt very much that this is the case. The UNC is too divided against itself and much of the populace is getting fed up with what they see as political posturing in place of action on issues of concern, such as crime or the cost of food. Selecting Kamla Persad-Bissessar, a Panday devotee and likely hand-picked successor, as Leader of the Opposition means that there will be more of the same from the UNC for the foreseeable future. There is much speculation that she will merely be a seat-warmer for former AG Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj, who would need to win a seat in a by-election for Panday's seat or the next parliamentary elections to be considered for the Leader position, or even for Panday himself if he is somehow able to get his conviction overturned on appeal. END COMMENT.
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